



NORTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT *of* HEALTH

NEWS RELEASE

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State Health Department Reminds North Dakotans of Importance of Hand Washing To Avoid Influenza, Colds, Vomiting and Diarrhea

BISMARCK, N.D. — Each winter, North Dakotans are at risk of contracting colds, influenza, or vomiting and diarrhea caused by viruses. Hand washing is one of the cheapest and easiest ways to protect yourself against illness, according to Julie Goplin, epidemiologist with the North Dakota Department of Health.

“During the winter months, people spend more time indoors and are often in close contact with each other, which allows viruses to spread more easily,” Goplin said. “That’s why it’s so important to always wash your hands. Although hand washing seems like such a simple thing, it is one of the most important things you can do to prevent the spread of diseases.”

Norovirus Information

Viral gastroenteritis (GAS-tro-en-ter-I-tis) is an inflammation of the stomach and intestines commonly caused by a group of viruses known as noroviruses. Although often referred to as the “24-hour flu” or “stomach flu,” this illness is *not* related to the flu (or influenza). Illness due to norovirus infection is highly contagious and causes nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps, fever and body aches. Symptoms usually last for 24 to 48 hours.

To prevent spreading the illness to others, avoid handling and preparing food when you are sick and until 48 hours after diarrhea ends, and always stay home when you are ill. Viruses often can be shed in the stool for several days after diarrhea ends. Frequent hand washing also can help prevent the spread of the illness, or can help you avoid getting the illness in the first place.

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Influenza Information

Influenza is a respiratory illness with fever, cough and sore throat caused by the influenza virus. Symptoms may last up to a week. An estimated 10 percent to 20 percent of the population contracts influenza each year, and complications of influenza and pneumonia contribute to the deaths of nearly 400 North Dakotans annually, most of whom are older than 64. However, a large number of influenza cases occur in children younger than 10, many of whom require hospitalization.

To help prevent the spread of influenza, the Department of Health urges everyone to:

- Get a flu shot if you have not had one this season. (It's not too late.)
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when sneezing or coughing.
- Stay home from work, school or recreational activities when you're ill.

For more information about viral gastroenteritis or to report a possible outbreak, contact Julie Goplin, North Dakota Department of Health, at 800.472.2180. For information about influenza, contact Michelle Feist, North Dakota Department of Health, at 800.472.2180.

-- 30 --

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